‘That’s who I’d be, if I could sing’: Reflections on a verbatim project with mothers of sexually abused children

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Abstract

In this article I consider a charge often levelled against verbatim theatre: that it is essentially appropriative and that it uses the life experiences of vulnerable and marginalized individuals and communities within our society in order to authenticate or invigorate theatre making. By using as a case study, a verbatim theatre project I led involving the charity Mosac and seven mothers of sexually abused children, I examine the process and the relationships that emerged between the verbatim subjects who offered up their stories as part of the project and the actors who played them at a public rehearsed reading of the play. Drawing on psychoanalytic readings of ‘identification’, I challenge the assumption that appropriation always only equates to an eradication of the other by the self. Instead I propose that the enactment of the verbatim subject’s story by a professional actor can facilitate a moment of recognition and a positive process of empathetic identification which, if handled carefully, can be beneficial or even therapeutic for the verbatim subjects who offer up their stories in this way.

Keywords: verbatim theatre**,** sexual abuse**,** identification

speaking for others, appropriation

Introduction

In *Autobiography and Performance*, Deirdre Heddon presents a somewhat damning indictment of verbatim theatre. Whilst for Heddon autobiographical performance is potentially 'transformative' (Heddon 2008: 4), verbatim theatre stands accused of being an unethical and appropriative practice, 'an act of ventriloquism' as she calls it (2008: 129), where stories from the marginalized and vulnerable in our community are solicited and then used to authenticate the plays that theatre makers wish to construct. Citing Linda Alcoff's seminal essay 'The Problem of Speaking for Others', Heddon rightly highlights the political and ethical dangers implicit within a practice that speaks *as* or *on behalf of* another and which, on some level at least, claims to be true. </UIP>

<IP>In this article, I want to take a closer look at Heddon's criticism and reconsider the terms of the transaction that takes place between those who speak *for* and those who are spoken *of* in the context of verbatim theatre. By drawing on a verbatim project I generated in 2007, which told the stories of seven mothers of sexually abused children, I will propose that we should understand the relationship between those who do the speaking (the actors) and those whose stories are told (the verbatim subjects) as one based on reciprocity. In this way it becomes possible to interpret this as an exchange that is grounded upon conviviality and of potential therapeutic value. Focusing on the concept of identification, and in particular, looking closely at the manner in which the mothers identified with the actors who performed them, I will re-examine the assumption that speaking *for* or *on behalf* of another, whilst certainly appropriative, is *necessarily* in itself unethical or disempowering.

The ventriloquist's dummies: The case against verbatim theatre

All verbatim theatre, like its closely associated practice documentary theatre, is, of course, constructed through a creative process that is constitutively *appropriative.* Both practices derive stories and testimony from real people, their actual lived experiences and real events. Through the appropriation of retrieved documents, transcripts and specially facilitated interviews, stories unfold that promise to be less mediatized than fictive theatrical works. As Linda Ben-Zvi suggests, they assert certain truth claims, offering to 'provide a powerful corrective to the mediatized versions of reality claiming legitimacy' (Ben-Zvi 2006: 45). However, it is precisely the truth claims implicit in the appropriative activity of verbatim and documentary theatres that most trouble some commentators. For although, on the one hand, this act of appropriation seems to assure us of a more *truthful* story, it also stands accused of simply using an individual's life experience as a means of validating or further authenticating a piece of theatre. Audiences are persuaded or perhaps, as some might argue, even manipulated (see Bottoms 2006) into believing that a documentary or verbatim play is more truthful or more insightful than fictive counterparts because the material it contains was appropriated from actual court inquests, real personal statements or interviews. Stephen Bottoms condemns the truth claims of verbatim theatre for the way it 'tends to fetishize the notion that we are getting things "word for word" straight from the mouths of those "involved" ' (Bottoms 2006: 59). Implicit to verbatim theatre's approach, he suggests, is the suggestion that theatre can ultimately provide 'unmediated access to the words of the orginary speaker, and by extension to that speaker's uncensored thoughts and feelings'. If this is the promise of verbatim, it is already always doomed to failure for not only does it omit 'the world-shaping role of the writer in editing and juxtaposing the

gathered materials', but it also relies on a metaphysical truth claim of the logos, where the truth is transparently self-evident and always only revealed to the speaker and in the words that are spoken (Bottoms 2006: 59). This faithful adherence to logocentrism has been fully critiqued by Derrida and post-structuralist thought.

Yet, to return to Heddon's criticism, we should note that her condemnation of verbatim does not rest solely on its so-called truth claims. In addition, Heddon draws attention to questions around the playwright's accountability and the ethics of creating theatre that is derived from the life experiences of actual individuals, suggesting that verbatim theatre becomes yet another means of exploiting the marginalized and the vulnerable, leading, in effect, to further disempowerment. Referring to the inclusion of the recorded voice of murdered sex worker Anne Marie Foy near the end of Liverpool Everyman's production *Unprotected* (2006), Heddon asks: 'what agency does Anne Marie Foy have here? Is she used, even in death, for emotional effect and impact?' (Heddon 2008: 133).

Underpinning Heddon's concerns are important ethical questions about the responsibility of speaking *for* or *on behalf of* others: how is it possible to speak for the other without eradicating or subsuming his or her otherness? How do we situate ourselves in relation to someone else's story without falling into a passive, narcissistic version of empathic identification, where we subsume the other's suffering as our own? These are difficult questions to answer. Yet whilst Heddon is correct to acknowledge the 'importance of agency in the act of autobiographical performance', the decision not to speak for the other but only for oneself risks the danger of foreclosing the possibility of solidarity, limiting the capacity for political advocacy (Heddon 2008: 4). As Alcoff explains:

> [A]dopting the position that one should only speak for oneself raises similarly problematic questions. For example, we might ask, if I don't speak for those less privileged than myself, am I abandoning my political responsibility to speak out against oppression, a responsibility incurred by the very fact of my privilege? If I should not speak for others, should I restrict myself to following their lead uncritically? Is my greatest contribution to *move over and get out of the way*?
>
> (Alcoff 1991/92: 8)

Of course, there may be times when 'to move over and get out of the way' may be the only ethical response, but there are certainly also situations when our withdrawal equates to an abdication of our responsibility. Perhaps then the question becomes not simply whether we should speak for the other, but how can we speak for her or him in a way that is empowering and ethical. Della Pollock suggests that rather than 'subsuming the other' the performance of other people's stories can open up the possibility of connectivity, recognition and an obligation and responsibility towards the other. She says: 'We see each other and we (must) see to each other through the performance of witnessing' (Pollock 2005: 4). But how does this sense of responsibility and accountability translate into practice? And specifically how do playwrights, actors and subjects of verbatim theatre approaches situate themselves within this process? Before moving on to look more closely at my own experience of generating a verbatim theatre project and the questions this raised for me, I want to clarify my use of the term 'verbatim theatre' and specifically to consider how this particular theatrical strategy differs from documentary theatre practices.

Verbatim theatre: A definition of terms

Although the distinction between these two theatrical approaches seems in part to be attributed to a simple difference of cultural semantics (the term 'documentary theatre' is more common in the United States, whereas 'verbatim theatre' is more widely used in the United Kingdom), there are, as Chris Megson and Alison

Forsyth note, ‘points of tension as well as consensus’ between these two forms of theatre. Documentary theatre, for example, traditionally makes greater use of retrieved documents and the archive, whereas verbatim theatre tends to prioritize the utterance of the witness (Megson and Forsyth 2009: 2). In documentary theatre we might expect to encounter a wider range of different types of *retrieved* material or, to use Carol Martin’s term different ‘bodies of evidence’, which pre-exist the creative process of the play, such as court proceedings, witness statements or e-mail correspondence (Martin 2006). In verbatim theatre projects, interviews are often undertaken by the playwright or by the actors themselves solely as part of the creative process. Individual stories and particular perspectives are identified by the playwright or director who draws them together in order to tell a particular story. Unlike documentary theatre then, verbatim tends to acquire its authority more from its use of word-for-word accounts than its use of concrete, retrieved and verifiable ‘evidence’.

<IP>It is this dependence on iteration and the truth claims that are attached to this form of re-enactment and re-presentation that leads Janelle Reinelt to express her ‘dislike’ for the term verbatim. According to Reinelt, ‘verbatim needlessly ups the ante on the promise of documentary’; unlike documentary theatre, verbatim ‘inevitably falls short of technical truth’ (Reinelt 2009: 13-14). Yet generating a ‘technical’ or even a ‘factual’ truth is not necessarily the function of verbatim theatre, nor should the question of truth be expected to form the grounds of its critique. Instead, or such is my proposal, we should understand the verbatim text more in terms of *testimony* rather than documentary. Theorization in witnessing suggests that the act of testimony can be understood to assert several different types of truth claims (narrative, autobiographical, historical, for example).

Commentators in this field draw our attention to the incomplete, fragmented and subjective limits of personal narratives. As Shoshana Felman points out, testimony is constitutively partial and incomplete:

> As a relation to events, testimony seems to be composed of bits and pieces of a memory that has been overwhelmed by occurrences that have not settled into understanding or remembrance, acts that cannot be constructed as knowledge nor assimilated into full cognition […] what the testimony does not offer is, however, a completed statement, a totalizable account of those events.
>
> <(Felman and Laub 1992: 5)

Of course there are many plays that exist somewhere betwixt and between the boundaries of documentary and verbatim theatre (David Hare's *Permanent Way* for example). But I would argue that there is an important distinction to be made between the verbatim play that is created with the explicit intention of telling an individual's or a community's story and the use of verbatim text simply as another form of research for a play that 'just happens to use lines […] given by other people' (Hare 2008: 60). Using verbatim to tell an individual's or a community's story engages the writer in an ethical contract with those offering up their life experiences. In this context the individual offering their story becomes the *verbatim subject* and as such should have some agency within the process. This form of drama is less about building up a journalistic, verifiable and 'totalizable account' of an event and could be better understood as an act of testimony, which following Felman's definition, can be understood as a 'performative speech act', a *promise* to speak of that which has been lived through (Felman and Laub 1992: 5). In the context of the witnessing of testimony, truth is less about correspondence of representation to a factual state of affairs and more about complex processes of verification, or to use the philosopher Simon Critchley's terms, 'justification'. In his book *Infinitely Demanding*, writing about

the ethics of Alain Badiou, Critchley rejects the idea that truth is 'some correspondence between subject and event' and instead proposes that in the context of ethics, at least, we need to '[replace] talk of truth with that of justification' (Critchley 2008 48). Testimony then does not seek to correspond to or 'report' a factual truth, rather it justifies (through the act of testifying) a subjective encounter with an event or a situation. It is this act of speaking out in verbatim theatre and the promise that this bears witness to a concrete situation or moment in history that constitutes the truth claims of this practice. Rather than revealing some kind of verifiable, factual truth, it is the personal perspectives and life experiences contained within and performed by the verbatim text that are evidential in and of themselves. To testify then, is to promise to speak of that which has been *lived through* and it is this act of attestation itself that contains a truth claim, not the 'fact' it corresponds to, as Felman again eloquently elucidates:

> To testify – to *vow* to *tell*, to *promise* and *produce* one's own speech as material evidence for truth – is to accomplish a *speech act*, rather than to simply formulate a statement.
>
> (Felman and Laub 1992: 5)

The case study: A verbatim project to tell the stories of seven mothers of sexually abused children

The distinction between testimonial, factual and verifiable 'truth' takes on monumental emotional and legal significance when dealing with the issue of child abuse. It soon became clear from the experiences of the mothers we worked with that the process of providing verifiable evidence of sexual abuse to a court of law is extremely complex and disturbing for both the child and the parent(s) caring for them. This is further discussed in a government report *Cross Government Action Plan of Sexual Violence and Abuse* (2007), which was compiled in association

with government departments, chief police officers, the Crown Prosecution Service and community and voluntary groups. The report states that although '[a]round 21% of girls and 11% of boys experience some form of child sexual abuse', it is still very difficult to 'report and to prosecute' sexual offences (HM Government 2007: iii-v). These findings are also echoed in a report commissioned by the NSPCC in 2008, which draws attention to the secrecy and silence that surrounds this form of sexual abuse, stating that: 'Three-quarters (72%) of sexually abused children did not tell anyone about the abuse at the time' (Crawson et al. 2000). Yet despite the fact that most child sexual abuse is perpetrated either by a family member or by someone known to the child (and in the home), this form of abuse rarely comes to public attention and the story of the predatory paedophile is far more likely to be taken up by the popular press. Familial child sexual abuse then continues to be treated as a taboo or a secret that is difficult to talk about. This issue was raised early on in our verbatim project by many of those involved. It consequently shaped the development of our methodology and informed our decision to focus on verbatim theatre strategies rather than a documentary theatre approach.

Developing the project's methodology

The project that eventually became known as 'From the Mouths of Mothers' was a collaboration between myself (a senior lecturer in Applied Theatre at Central School of Speech and Drama), Big Fish Young People's Theatre Company (a company that, at that time, used theatre to address issues relating to social injustice and young people) and Mosac (a charity that provides support resources for non-abusing parents and carers of sexually abused children).[1] It developed out

of Big Fish's three-year lottery-funded project on unwanted sexual contact and enabled us to address the issue of sexual abuse in a fully supported and clearly defined context.[2] By focusing on the narratives of mothers rather than the young people themselves, we were able to ensure that those participating in the project could receive emotional support by the services provided by Mosac.[3] Furthermore, all the mothers who participated in the project had been invited to do so by Denise Hubble, Mosac's counselling coordinator. This meant that Denise could identify particular individuals she felt were at an appropriate point in their emotional journey to participate in this kind of project. The interviews, which lasted between two and three hours each, were undertaken by two colleagues and me.[4] They took place in the counselling room at Mosac, the location of the interviews was important for one of the objectives of the project was to ensure that the mothers felt comfortable and empowered by the process of creating the play.[5] The values implicit to the project's methodology both informed the interview process itself and placed the empowerment and well-being of the mothers themselves at the heart of the project. Whilst the objective of creating a play of artistic integrity was of crucial importance, it was also hoped that the reciprocity with/between the mothers would be an experience that in some way would be beneficial and positive. As the playwright, this of course impacted upon the artistic choices I made. The interviews produced seven enormously complex and emotionally powerful stories. Out of respect for the mothers who spoke to us, I chose to tell each of these stories in the play, rather than selecting the most poignant or the best told. By doing this I was conscious of not eradicating or silencing any of the women who had so generously offered up their stories to us. For as Heddon indicates, being asked to tell your story only to discover it has

been cut from the script can be disempowering or worse, in Heddon's terms, could render the verbatim subject as 'doubly "voiceless" ' (Heddon 2008: 136).

It was from a desire to generate a supportive creative process that led us, at the start of the project, to ask the mothers directly about how they would like the interview process to operate and how they wanted their stories to be told.[6] At this meeting, an important question emerged that would ultimately inform the artistic direction of the play and the project's methodology, this was: should the play focus only on the mother's stories or should it incorporate a wide range of different voices into the text (such as the social worker, the police officer, the legal representative)? From discussion with the mothers it became clear that whilst there were many differences in the way each woman narrated their experiences, there were also many similarities in the stories that were told (particularly in relation to the way the families had perpetually been let down by the legal system and social agencies of care), it was also clear that these mothers had already – too often – experienced the voices of 'others' either silencing them or contradicting their testimonies ('Your child's disclosure of sexual abuse does not prove anything', 'We think you are lying', 'You and your child can only receive counselling if you make all the transcripts available to the defence and your husband's legal team'). It became clear to us all that our project was not going to be about validating or factually proving the statistics that evidenced the failure of legal systems to adequately respond to the crisis of child sexual abuse as this was already being regularly 'performed' in the real-life events of these women and their children. Instead the play would seek to find a way of performing the mother's stories so they could be listened to and perhaps finally

heard. We also felt it important to facilitate a creative process that respected the integrity of the mother's experiences, enabling them to tell their stories without being contradicted or judged. The result was a verbatim play that used only the material that was transcribed from our recordings of our interviews with the mothers we spoke to.

The process of editing this material together into a play was a complex and, at times, difficult process that began with the task of transcribing the fourteen hours of interviews we had recorded.[7] As the playwright I then worked with the transcriptions, listened again to all the interviews and gradually worked together a structure that enabled me to tell each mother's unique story whilst also pulling together shared themes and moments of commonality. The danger of this approach was that I might have inadvertently sensationalized or manipulated the mother's stories in my endeavours to generate a coherent story and structure. In order to ensure the play would remain rooted in the experiences of the mothers, I tried, where possible, to adopt a reflexive creative approach whereby I allowed the play's direction to be informed and shaped not only by the content of the mother's interviews but also by the mother's feedback to the readings and what they spoke about at the subsequent meetings I had with them about the different drafts of the script. Always at the forefront of the mother's discussions, and possibly, underpinning their reason for participating in this project was a desire – or rather – a *need* to make this story public and to 'get it out there'. In the public's awareness of child sexual abuse and interestingly within a lot of research in this area, the positioning of the supportive mother who is often the prime carer of her child following disclosure is largely omitted. To facilitate a process of speaking

out and to enable these mothers the space to testify and tell their stories was then to become a central aim and the 'justification' for the play.

Adopting this kind of reflexive approach, which incorporates the participation of verbatim subjects themselves in the creative process, is certainly not a new approach to theatre making, and is one that is particularly familiar within applied theatre practices. Yet, interestingly within a lot of the commentary around verbatim and documentary theatre there seems to be very few examples of playwrights evaluating their projects by consulting those whose stories generated it. Although questions of truth and verifiability are of great importance to the ethical integrity of the verbatim theatre form, we should perhaps also ask whether there is also a danger that this quest for truth potentially eclipses other pressing ethical questions we might ask of this creative methodology. This is particularly pertinent when we consider the role and the positioning of the verbatim subjects themselves within the generation of a text. Whilst the methodology was constructed on the expectation of reciprocity and some form of beneficial outcome for the mothers, the therapeutic potential of the project took me somewhat by surprise. By moving on to look more closely at the relationships that developed between the mothers who offered up their stories and the actors who we employed to perform them, I hope to deepen our understanding of how the concept of reciprocity might operate within the context of verbatim theatre.

The verbatim subject and the actor: Moments of reciprocity and relationships of identification

Throughout the work on From the Mouths of Mothers, I became increasingly intrigued by the dynamics of the relationship that developed between the mothers

who told their stories and the actors who performed them. The actors first became involved in the project when we prepared the script for a first reading for the mothers who had participated in the project and other workers and volunteers at Mosac.[8] From the initial dynamics that developed between the actors and the mothers at this reading, it became clear that this relationship – which seemed to be one of an intense identification – was a positive, even therapeutic aspect of the project. After the reading, the mothers spoke extremely warmly of the actors, expressing great affection for them, and even later on in the project, articulating some concern about the impact their story might have had upon them. When I began to look more closely at this curious identificatory relationship, an interesting and pressing paradox began to emerge that raised some important ethical questions about 'appropriation' and the possibility of reciprocity both in the context of this particular project and for verbatim theatre practice more broadly.

The paradox can be developed in the following terms: on the one hand, it became clear from my participant observation that the act of identification adopted by the mothers towards the actors had a positive and potentially therapeutic value for them.[9] Yet, on the other hand this process of identification was also inevitably constructed upon the replacement of the mothers by the actors who enacted them. However, rather than feeling threatened or disempowered by this process, the mothers engaged positively with the actors and in fact actively sought to find points of similarity and cohesion between themselves and their enacted representation. As we begin to look more closely at this identificatory relationship, we begin to confront some apparent contradictions, particularly,

insofar as the act of identification can be understood as a form of appropriation or an eradication of the other. Through the verbatim theatre process, the mothers – like all other verbatim subjects – encountered three stages of appropriation. First, the stories of the mothers were appropriated by me – the playwright – who edited and collated them together to make a play. There was then a second appropriation, this time by the actors who performed the play. This particular appropriative process seemed to contain the most potential to be disempowering, because the actors were taking the mothers' stories, their intonation and their speech patterns and incorporating these into their own performances. Certainly, there was a resonance here with the questions of 'power' and 'speaking' raised by Alcoff and Heddon when they say: 'who is speaking, who is spoken of, and who listens is a result, as well as an act, of political struggle' (Alcoff, in Heddon 2008: 129). Yet importantly, we should note that the mothers were not involuntary participants within this process, in fact quite the reverse – after all the mothers willingly shared their stories and strongly wanted their experiences to be shared publicly. Nevertheless, the constitutively appropriative process of verbatim ultimately displaced the mothers as the 'proper' loci of the story, which opened up the possibility of misrepresentation and un-truths.

However, I would argue that a third appropriation can also be attributed to the mothers themselves. I will call this an 'appropriatory identification' and it describes the mother's strong sense of identification with the enacted representation of themselves in the play. I first noticed this become manifest in the language the mothers adopted in their discussion of 'their actor' (a language that was soon readily picked up by some of the other people who worked at

Mosac). In their discussion of 'their' actor the mothers sought to cohere their own sense of self with their enactment and to dissolve and dismantle some of the concrete physical differences between the actors who played them and themselves.[10] This was further amplified – at least in the perception of the mothers – when one of the mothers seemed to suggest that 'her actor' almost seemed to know her better than she knew herself. I cannot claim to fully comprehend or accurately interpret the full meaning of this 'moment', but the phenomenon does suggest that the mode of identification at play within this project was far more complex than it first seemed.

Problematizing identification: Appropriation, replacement, misrecognition

However, in order to examine this 'moment' in depth, first we need to consider the implications of using a term such as 'identification' in the context of verbatim. In her analysis of Freud's theory of identification, Diane Fuss points out that for Freud 'identification is fundamentally a question of *resemblance* and *replacement* […] a metaphoric structure of substitution and exchange' (Fuss 1995: 51). When we identify with someone else we look for similarities and resemblance and begin to see ourselves within the experiences of the other. In this way we replace the other with ourselves and see the other's happiness or suffering as our own. It is identification that, of course, also makes empathy possible. However, identification or what historiographer Dominick LaCapra calls 'unchecked identification' is ethically problematic as there is the danger of eradicating the alterity of other (that which is unknowable in the other) and replacing this with sameness or our own world-view. In *Writing History, Writing Trauma*, LaCapra defines identification as 'the unmediated fusion of self and other in which the

otherness or alterity of the other is not recognised and respected' (LaCapra 2001: 27). In his discussion of writing about historical trauma, LaCapra considers the danger of adopting full 'unchecked identification' with the 'victim' of trauma, which he suggests results in a confusion of self and other and the 'dubious' process of making oneself a 'surrogate victim who has a right to the victim's voice or subject position' ultimately 'taking the other's place' (LaCapra 2001: 78). In verbatim theatre then, to what extent does the enactment of the verbatim subject seek to portray a totalizing representation of the other? Does verbatim theatre, in other words, 'point' to its artifice and the production of a simulacrum? Or does it invite the audience into a process of 'unchecked identification' where they are no longer sure who is standing before them? Of course, verbatim theatre is part of a representational tradition that is defined by its capacity to be illusory and mimetic. Furthermore, even if there is any confusion about the authenticity or 'truthfulness' of the character from the perspective of the audience, the verbatim subjects themselves are fully apprised of who is speaking for whom in this context. Yet to return to our case study, in From the Mouths of Mothers rather than feeling betrayed or replaced by the actors performing them, the mothers welcomed their 'replacement' even sought to lessen the sense of difference and distance between themselves and 'their actor' who performed them.

We can draw out our initial paradox further, then, by suggesting that the identificatory process here seems to begin with *misrecognition.* The mothers seemed to find themselves positioned within a paradox: they recognized themselves in their actor's enactment, but also *misrecognized* the theatricality of this enactment and therefore began to identify with the actor themselves, potentially replacing the actor with themselves – or, of course, themselves with

the actor. We can never be sure of the exact source of this identification; it would seem that perhaps it was precisely the strangeness of this misrecognized representation that gave the mothers an almost uncanny glimpse of their own lives from another perspective. Perhaps it is through the elisions of the self and other and the alterity within the re-presentation of the self (which is fundamentally constitutive of identification) that enabled the mothers to derive some kind of therapeutic benefit from the verbatim project. To develop this further, I would suggest that it was the distance and differences (perceived or otherwise) between the mothers and their enactment – as made manifest through the actors – that enabled a move from what Dominick LaCapra describes as an 'acting out' of their past towards a process of 'working through'. By 'working through' LaCapra means a 'coming to terms' with the trauma that has been lived through, not a cure (LaCapra 2001: 144). And certainly not a forgetting but 'a kind of countervailing force' whereby, '[i]n working through, the person tries to gain a critical distance on a problem and to distinguish between past, present, and future' (LaCapra 2001: 143). Indeed, following Fuss, we can begin to see how identification can be understood – not as a form of misrecognition as our paradox seems to suggest – but as constitutive of the relationship between self and the other. Fuss defines it as 'the detour though the other that defines a self', and goes on to say '[i]dentification is from the beginning, a question of *relation*, of self to other, subject to object, inside to outside' (Fuss 1995: 2–3).

Identification and appropriation in practice: Some key moments

As I have already established, the verbatim project began with an initial meeting with the mothers. Here we discussed the overall methodology of the project and

began to establish how the mothers envisaged the general direction of the play. We ascertained at this point that the mothers were happy talking about all aspects of their experiences, that they wanted the final say in terms of the detail and 'facts' of what the play covered and that I, as the playwright, would be fully committed to accurately representing the stories that I was told. At this meeting the mothers outlined a number of issues related to child sexual abuse that they felt the play should address; these included the mothers' isolation from friends and family following the disclosure of abuse, the lack of support they received, their experience of not being believed by the social services and the legal system (and therefore their fight to protect their children from the perpetrator who would often seek access and custody of the child). In response I tried hard to situate these specific issues at the heart of the text I created. Following this meeting over the next few months each of the mothers was interviewed, they told their story; the material was then transcribed and then edited together into a first draft, which was presented back to the mothers at a first rehearsed reading with professional actors at Mosac. After responding to the feedback from this event, I then developed the final script further. This was then presented at a public rehearsed reading and post-show discussion at Central School of Speech and Drama.

A reflective evaluative discussion took place with the mothers both in a local pub after the final rehearsed reading and also at a formal meeting at Mosac. What was revealed from these discussions was the positive response the women had to the project, the impact it had had on their own journey of recovery, the benefits of sharing their experiences with others and the moments of commonality they perceived. They said:

> It was a very positive experience […].The play showed everyone that we're all so ordinary. That's what I liked about it. We're not that stereotypical person, people think we are. I want people watching the play to realise that.
>
> (Christine 13 September 2007)

> It was reassuring to meet other mothers and to discover how common our experiences are, it was also outrageous to realise how much we'd had in common in terms of our experience of the system and how let down we've all been.
>
> (Carol 13 September 2007)

The evaluation meeting at Mosac also explored how the women felt towards the actors who were playing them and it is by considering these issues that we can return to the principal focus of the article.

From this discussion and from my other observations throughout the project I noted – perhaps in an echo to the three stages of appropriation mentioned above – three aspects of identification occurring: firstly, there was a great deal of affection expressed between the mothers and the actors who were playing them. This was particularly noticeable at the end of the first rehearsed reading when many of the mothers and 'their' actors 'found' each other afterwards and spontaneously embraced. There was a lot of 'guessing' from both the actors and the mothers about who was who – which perhaps contributed to this curious moment of coming together. Secondly, and more peculiar perhaps, is that throughout the process the mothers and some of the staff at Mosac expressed the opinion that there was a physical resemblance between the mothers and the actors who 'played' them. The director and I were both slightly bemused by this at the time. The third identificatory aspect emerged in the mother's language as they began to refer to the actors as 'my actor' or 'my one' and there was an interesting jostling in their language as they sought to talk about their story and the performance of

'their actor'. This 'jostling' is captured in an intriguing exchange that took place in the evaluation session when we were talking about what it was like to see yourself performed by an actor:

> I pause when I talk, then think about it, then speak. And [my actor] does it too.
> It was so sort of spooky, it's like me talking but my mouths not moving.
> (Saara 13 September 2007)

> The oddest part was hearing someone playing me […] Superb actors. The singing was brilliant too.
> (Christine 13 September 2007)
> Yes! And everyone thinks I can sing now!
> (Saara 13 September 2007)
> No that's what you'd sound like if you could sing!
> (Anne 13 September 2007)

The final exchange between two of the mothers who, following the play – I refer to as 'Saara' and 'Anne' – is particularly interesting because it encapsulates some of the key questions I have about the relationship between the mothers and the actors. The singing that Saara refers to here is when 'her actor' sang a short child's rhyme at the start of each of the five movements of the play. This was not in the script, it was not sung 'in character' nor did it allude to any aspect of Saara's character. It was a moment of theatricality invented by the director as she was preparing the rehearsed reading. It was clear from the tone of Saara's comment that she enjoyed this moment in the play and her description of it was playful and humorous. The spirit of this comment was matched by Anne's response, which seems to be attempting to qualify, or amend Saara's account of her identificatory relationship with the actor who played her.

But what might I mean by my use of the term 'identification' in this context? Following Freud's discussion of identification in *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego* ([1921] 1991), I suggest that when Saara says 'and now everyone thinks I can sing' she is perhaps encountering something akin to Freud's primary form of identification, where she aspires to be *like* the actor who is performing her. We could read her comment as meaning: 'I wish I could sing like this actress', or 'I wish I had the confidence to sing like her'. Anne then attempts to correct her, saying: 'No that's what you'd sound like if you could sing!' This response is interesting, because here Anne seems to imply that not only does the actress playing Saara physically *resemble* Saara, but also this actress has the power to unearth in Saara an as yet undiscovered talent. It is significant because at another point in the evaluative meeting at Mosac, Anne also said the following:

> Even when I've been to counselling, my counsellor has said I do this funny thing with my face, I sort of look away when I speak. […]. I went to see the play and […] she's doing it! That's exactly what the counsellor said I was doing!
>
> (Anne 13 September 2007)

For Anne, not only did 'her actor' perform her words effectively but also through the performance, an aspect of herself that had eluded the interviews and therefore the playscript itself, became re-presented. The actual or *imagined* performance of this aspect of her character is clearly important to Anne. For not only is this something she is currently working on in her counselling sessions but it is also something that challenges her communication with her youngest son, Sam who, as we know from the script, was the youngest of her sons to be abused by their father.

For the mothers then, their identification with the actors was a positive, empathetic experience that 'connected' them to each other and the whole process of the project itself. Yet these positive experiences seem to contradict some of the problematic connotations of empathy and identification, which relate these terms with the concept of replacement and a colonization of the other by the self. Furthermore, the mothers' positive response to being 'replaced' in the act of performance by an actor challenge some of the criticisms quoted earlier from Heddon and Bottoms – for example their contention that the use of the transcribed voice in verbatim theatre is a commodification of experience used by the playwright as a means of further substantiating the verbatim play's claims to authenticity. However, despite Heddon's critique of verbatim theatre as 'performances of solicitation and/or appropriation', she also, somewhat ironically perhaps, overlooks the perspective of the verbatim subject and what she or he might wish for in return for offering up his or her story in this way (Heddon 2008: 128). This argument does not seem to allow for the possibility of any reciprocity in this process – at least not from the position of the individual who volunteers to participate as a verbatim subject.

The verbatim subjects who participate in the creative process of making verbatim theatre and then watch the play are well aware of the appropriation of themselves by the actors who perform them. They know it is not really them on the stage. I do not overlook the significance of Heddon's criticism – particularly in view of the power of the playwright to fabricate, shift and conjure the meaning of the text and the ethics of these decisions – but it is important to allow for the possibility that in

some instances the verbatim subjects do enter into this process willingly and do get something back in return.

I would like to suggest then that by drawing on Fuss's exploration of identification we can begin to see how it is the very presence of the 'otherness' within the enactment of verbatim that potentially opens up the possibility of a processual move from an 'acting out' to a 'working through' of the events of the past. To take this further, I would like to suggest that it is precisely by understanding how the concepts of identification and otherness connect and intersect that we can begin to form some concluding comments about the capacity of verbatim theatre to establish ethical relationships of reciprocity between those who tell us their stories and those who perform them.

Conclusion: Otherness, 'working though' and the need for uncertainty

Identification is, following Fuss, a 'psychical mechanism' through which the self *recognizes* itself (Fuss 1995: 2). It is a process undertaken in relation to the other: 'I discover who I am in my desire to distinguish myself from who I am not.' Certainly, if we consider Lacan's writing on the *mirror stage*, we see how it is through the mirror that the infant discovers his or herself, finding a sense of unity to replace the turbulence of fragmentation that preceded this. Yet whilst this moment of 'jubilation' enthrals the infant, Lacan draws attention to the 'discordance with his own reality' this moment precipitates. The mirror image then is constructed upon exteriority and founded upon otherness and this, in Lacan's terms '[situates] the agency of the ego […] in a fictional direction' (Lacan 1995: 2). The drama of the mirror stage engenders a sense of recognition

and unity, yet it is also characterized by otherness, alienation and almost, one could suggest, a sense of trickery or illusion, or in Malcolm Bowie's terms 'the mirror works upon the individual as a ruse, a deception, an inveiglement' (Bowie 1991: 23). What we can begin to extrapolate from Lacan's writing is that it is often through mis-identification, and the otherness of misrecognition, that we come to learn about ourselves.

What was clear from my experience of the project and what echoed in the evaluation session with the mothers was that despite the inaccuracies of representation in verbatim theatre, or perhaps *because* of the critical distance afforded by this flawed mimetic process, the verbatim play had clearly enabled some of the mothers to gain some critical distance on their experiences. 'Saara'said:

> When I saw the play, I was amazed at how far I'd come […] I realised that I've come a long way and the issues I was facing then aren't the same as now.
> (Saara 13 September 2007)

And for 'Anne', the project had enabled her to revisit difficult emotional issues in a perhaps more critical way:

> It's made me look things in a different way. Whereas before I'd have avoided looking at these issues, now I'd find a way of addressing them. It was a good way of dealing with it. Seeing it acted out like that.
> Anne 13 September 2007)

These comments seem to evidence a sense of *movement* and the possibility that, for some of the mothers (and this of course depends strongly on where each of the mothers were in their own journey at the point of the project), the project contributed in some way to their capacity to move through a process of 'acting

out' and into a 'working through' of these events. Of course, as LaCapra indicates, 'working through' does not equate to a cure or a process of forgetting:

> It means coming to terms with the trauma, including its details, and critically engaging the tendency to act out the past and even to recognize why it may be necessary and even in certain respects desirable or at least compelling.
>
> (LaCapra 2001: 144)

Of course, when considering the ethical implications of speaking *for* or *on behalf of* another, it is important not to fall complacently into a false assumption that any methodology – however carefully thought out – can guarantee ethical practice. After all, we do not live out our lives in isolation and the stories of our experiences will always implicate others. Any practice that is constitutively appropriative must engage in an ongoing process of self-reflection and the questioning of assumptions. I might suggest that an ethics of practice for verbatim theatre should always begin with a process questioning about why we are doing what we are doing and how we think it will benefit the participants. The complexity and importance of this ethical dilemma and the questions it precipitates was articulated by one of the mothers, her comment summing up the perpetual sense of unknowingness that must accompany an ethical response to any representative process that seeks to re-perform actuality:

> What was difficult was knowing what to leave out and what to put in. My needs are different to my daughter's. I want to change society and that's why I'm taking part in the project but I also want to protect Holly […] And I think does any of this [doing the play] help Holly? What's in Holly's best interest? Is it good to keep talking about it? I came to conclusion that it is good to talk about it. But I ask myself am I doing the right thing?
>
> (Christine 13 September 2007)

Notes

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Anne 13 September 2007, interview, project evaluation meeting at Mosac*

Carol 13 September 2007, interview, project evaluation meeting at Mosac*

Christine 13 September 2007, interview, project evaluation meeting at Mosac*

Saara 13 September 2007, interview, project evaluation meeting at Mosac*

* The participant's real names have not been used to protect their confidentiality. These names refer to those allocated to their character in the play.

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<EN>[1] At the time of this project, Big Fish Theatre was based in Greenwich, London, and I worked with the company as a trustee. The company has since split into two: Little Fish Theatre continues to operate in South East London; the other 'half' of the company has subsequently moved to South West England and become Creative Nature.

[2] This project was focused largely around a series of drama residencies that took place in education settings in South London. It looked at how young people negotiate sexual relationships and unwanted sexual contact.

[3] All the mothers who participated in the project had access to a counselling service at Mosac.

[4] One was the co-artistic director of Big Fish Theatre at that time and the other was the chair of trustees for Mosac and also a regular volunteer on the organization's helpline.

[5] The counselling room was also significant because it was, for the mothers, associated with the sharing of difficult, psychological reflections and it is likely that this informed the way the mothers chose to tell their stories. As ethnographer Norman Denzin suggests, the transcribed interview is not simply a 'method of gathering information' (Denzin 2003: 80); it is a dialogic encounter between two

or more people, ‘an interpretative practice […] [where] meanings are contextual, improvised, and performative’ (Denzin 2003: 81). Arguably, the mothers’ relationships with the counselling room were implicitly re-presented within the narratives they shared with their interviewers. Certainly this would suggest that more work should be done to trace the relationship between the site of the verbatim interview and the structure and content of the narratives that are told.

[6] It is perhaps important to note here that the group did not offer a homogenized response to this question. For example, some mothers felt they had been targeted by the perpetrator because they were vulnerable, whereas others in the group strongly resisted being labelled as ‘vulnerable’. Their view was that sexual abuse can happen to anyone and that they were no more vulnerable to this than anyone else.

[7] This was undertaken by a professional typist.

[8] Both readings were directed by a professional director, Janette Smith. The actors we cast had previously worked with the director and kindly agreed, due to our funding restrictions, to offer their services for a modest expense only fee. Denise Hubble and myself organized each of the readings and afterwards facilitated a discussion with the women and other audience members. We then spoke to each of the mother afterwards individually.

[9] Here I should make it clear that in terms of my positioning within the project my role as researcher could be described as ‘covert’. The focus of my relationship with the mothers was as a playwright and project coordinator. My reflections on the identification that occurred between the mothers and the actors occurred retrospectively at the end of the project.

[10] It should be noted here that when the director cast the readings, although she may have had a 'type' of casting in mind, the castings largely depended on actor's availability and a willingness to work for expenses only. </EN>